

Socrates' Refutation of Apollo A note on *Apology* 21b7-c2

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Abstract If Socrates cannot show that the apparent meaning of Apollo's pronouncement – that no one is wiser than he – is inconsistent with the god's otherwise infallible wisdom, Socrates will have reasons for doubting his own claim to lack such wisdom and for accepting the indictments brought against him. At his trial, Socrates argues that he has shown this, that he has refuted Apollo, but the jury, ironically, disagrees and convicts him of impiety.

It has been argued about Plato's early dialogues that Socrates is made there to privilege beliefs derived from "information" he receives through certain forms of divination. These beliefs, the argument continues, are allowed to supplement Socrates' elenctically established human knowledge while remaining "logically independent" of it.¹ Such a view is needed, some believe, to solve the paradox that, while Socrates disavows knowledge of anything great or small, he is nonetheless and thoroughly convinced that his life is morally unimpeachable. Socrates, who claims his distinction is "not to think he knows what he does not know" also swears, without reservation, that he has never willingly done injustice to anyone and believes that he is justified in continuing to do just those things for which he is brought to trial.² He cannot consistently know his life is morally unimpeachable, yet he continues to live and treat others as if he can. Socrates will also claim that wrongdoing is the result of ignorance (*AP* 37a5-

¹ See Brickhouse and Smith (1984) 128 and (1986) 520ff. The point is reiterated in McPherran (1986) 300 and 303. A separate argument against this view is taken up by Vlastos (1988) 11ff.

² For disavowals of knowledge see *AP* 21b4-5, d5-6, 23a, 29b2-6, as well as *EU* 5a3-b7, *LA* 186b1-c1, *LY* 212a4-7, *HMA* 286c8-d3, *HMI* 372d2-e1, *GOR* 509a4-7. For the claims he has never done injustice and is justified in his practice of philosophy see *AP* 37a5-6, b2-5, and *AP* 28b5-9, 29d2-e3. Throughout this essay, the standard abbreviations for Plato's dialogues are used.

6 and 37b2-3, *GOR* 488a2-4 and 521c7-d4) implying that virtue follows from knowledge.³ These apparent conflicts can be explained, on the argument introduced above, by Socrates' confidence in divine signs which, while failing to secure the knowledge Socrates is seeking in answers to his "What is F?" questions, gives him the warrant he requires to hold the beliefs he does.⁴

This warrant could be substantively challenged if it turned out that Socrates also believes these divine signs themselves may be subject to elenctic refutation. If he were, as those who make the argument abbreviated above say he is, "certain that divinations, properly construed, provide truth" and "certain that god has made his wishes known to him,"⁵ Socrates could not reasonably undertake to refute or test what the god has said. There are good reasons, however, for supposing that Socrates does think he can cross-examine the god and that he does put Apollo himself to the elenctic test. These reasons derive from a passage in the *Apology* that gives a questionable impression of Socrates' reverence for divine communications⁶ and seems to provide enough evidence for the claim that Socrates makes it his mission to refute or question what Apollo says.⁷

For a long time I was at a loss about what in the world [the god] could mean. Then with great reluctance I turned to an examination of him in the following way. I went to one of those men reputed to be wise thinking that here if anywhere I would refute the god's response (*elenxôn to manteion*) and declare to the oracle (*apophanôn tô chrêsmô*), "This man is wiser than me, but you said I [was wiser]." (AP 21b7-c2)⁸

I show, here, contrary to what is expected, that Socrates does refute Apollo or, rather, that Socrates performs an elenchus on the god's pronouncement, and that this elenctic test sheds important light on the meaning and function of "refutation" in Socratic argumentation.⁹ Socrates "refutes" Apollo, not because, as is the case with his interrogations of interlocutors generally, he shows the god's beliefs are inconsistent but because testing his own beliefs about what the god's

³ See Benson (2000) 242-3.

⁴ Brickhouse and Smith (1984) 128.

⁵ Brickhouse and Smith (1984) 128 and (1986) 523-25.

⁶ Burnet (1970, 92) goes so far as to claim that Socrates, if reluctantly, sets out "to prove the god is a liar."

⁷ On Socrates' "mission" see Brickhouse and Smith (1983), Stokes and McPherran (2002, n.1).

⁸ All translations from the Greek are my own and compared with the authorities collected by Cooper.

⁹ Cf. Carpenter and Polansky, Benson (2000, 2002), Brickhouse and Smith (2002).

pronouncement means proves to be the operative sense in which the god himself can be “refuted.” So that what Socrates hopes to exhibit through his examinations of the politicians, poets and artisans is just that, since there is someone wiser than Socrates, he has reasons for believing the god means something other than what he appears at first to say. If the apparent meaning of Apollo’s pronouncement cannot be shown to be inconsistent with the god’s otherwise infallible wisdom, Socrates will have reasons for doubting his own claim to lack such wisdom. Important consequences would follow from this failed refutation.

One important consequence would be that in the long course of the examinations of his fellow Athenians that follow from this testing of the god’s pronouncement, Socrates’ long-held belief that he is wise in nothing at all is false. If that belief is false, then the consistency of his beliefs, the basis for Socrates testing the consistency of his interlocutor’s beliefs, is undermined. Another important consequence would be that Socrates would be more vulnerable to the charges made against him. In fact, Socrates’ belief about his own ignorance appears at first inconsistent with the manifest ignorance of all those Socrates interrogates. His examinations show rather that he really is wise (*AP* 20d8-9) and in fact wiser than the others he examines insofar as he alone among those he examines does not say he knows what he does not know. This result seems to confirm the god’s pronouncement about him, but Socrates finds a way to salvage his own belief (that he does not know) by recasting what he believes the god’s message means. Socrates must do this because rejecting one of his beliefs, especially the belief that he is not wise, would be tantamount to questioning the consistency of the established set of beliefs that make him who he is.¹⁰ Socrates staves off this threat to his very identity by interpreting the oracular response in a way that leaves the consistency of his beliefs and his ethical identity intact.

Following this line of reasoning, we can say there is no reason to privilege divine communications in Socrates’ case. They cannot serve as premises for anything conclusive or convincing for Socrates since they are always subject to questioning and since their wisdom will always be tested against the consistency of beliefs already held by Socrates. And since the only

¹⁰ See the consistency thesis argued for by Vlastos (1984) and reconstructed in my “Certainty and Consistency in the Socratic Elenchus.” On my view, since there is no certain foundation for the beliefs Socrates holds, since what holds these beliefs together is just their mutual fit with one another, then a change in any one belief changes the structure of the whole into which any one of these beliefs may fit. This account is part of an argument for a “non-foundational” reading of the Socratic elenchus.

test Socrates knows is the elenchus, we can conclude that, for Socrates, the pronouncements of gods and men alike, without exception, will be subject to his elenctic examinations.

From *Apology* 21b-23c Socrates undertakes, as he says (*AP* 21b1-2), to explain (*didaxein*) how the false accusations in the informal indictment came to be attached to him. The accusations are that Socrates, “a wise man,” meddles in “matters meteorologic,” examines everything under the earth, and makes the weaker argument the stronger (*AP* 18b7-c1). Here, Socrates tells the familiar story of his interrogations of anyone he or anyone else may think is wise, conducting these examinations, he says, *kata ton theon*, “as befits the god” (*AP* 21a4, 23b5). But how are we to understand this? According to Socrates, he began these examinations only after hearing the report about Chaerephon’s inquiry of Apollo at Delphi.¹¹ The activity that engages him the rest of his life, in one way or another, follows from the oracle’s pronouncement that no one is wiser than Socrates. Socrates’ immediate response to that oracle would appear to exhibit something less than reverence for what otherwise sanctions the way of life that makes Socrates outstanding among his peers.

Upon hearing these things [sc, the oracle’s report] I thought to myself: “whatever can the god be saying? and why does he speak in riddles (*ainittetai*)?” (*AP* 21b2-4)

We notice immediately that Socrates’ first thoughts here are not about the implications bound to follow from this divine revelation. Rather, Socrates wastes no time in questioning what in the world the god could be saying. And if what the oracle means to say is not obvious to Socrates, it can only be because it’s apparent meaning – that no one is wiser than he -- is inconsistent with something Socrates already believes to be true about himself, namely, that he is not wise at all. The apparent truth of the oracle is clearly not taken for granted by Socrates independently of some interrogation. This point is too often overlooked in the case of Socrates’ “divine signs.”¹² In general, what is “signed” by these portents must be divined by the one to whom it will become significant. They mean nothing on their own, and the case of Delphi’s pronouncement on Socrates’ wisdom appears no different in this respect. Socrates indicates

¹¹ There is, however, good reason to believe that the elenctic style of Socrates’ examinations precedes this event. See n. 15 below.

¹² Vlastos (1991, 280-1, citing Riddell (102) points out how references to Socrates’ *daimonion* (at *AP* 31c8-d1, for example) are contractions for the fuller *daimonion sêmeion*, and so “divine sign” and not as Nussbaum has it (1986, 234) “divine thing.” The complete expression can be found at *EUD* 272e3-4 (*to eiôthos sêmeion daimonion*) and *PHDR* 242b8-9 (*to eiôthos kai daimonion sêmeion*).

clearly that he is perplexed about what the god may be indicating here. Moreover, he appears to file a complaint about the god's style of pronouncement. The god speaks in a riddle, but why should this surprise much less bother Socrates when it was not at all unusual for the oracle to respond in the form of a proverb or enigmatic story (*ainos*)?¹³ Why should he (or we) be suspicious when the god communicates in terms that are not immediately obvious to humans?

One reason Socrates might have for his uncertainty about the oracle could come from his awareness of the procedures for soliciting advice from Delphi. The god, Apollo, speaking through his priestess, answered just those questions put to him by inquirers ritually purified through sacrifice who also made a "donation" or paid a tribute to him. The priestess herself, exhibited in an intoxicated state of emotional frenzy meant to confirm her possession by the god, was put the question by a male prophet who received it from the inquirers and who interpreted the Pythia's response in verses as required.¹⁴ Thus, Apollo's advice about Socrates' wisdom is mediated by rituals of purification, a tribute, the Pythia's intoxication, the prophet's interpretation of the priestess' utterance, and the manner of question put to Apollo by Chaerephon. While Socrates might have no reasons for questioning the ritual practices of the oracle, he might wonder about Chaerephon's motivations for putting such a question to the god.¹⁵ Would the god have given the same response to a similar question differently put by someone other than Chaerephon?¹⁶

¹³ *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 323 and 924.

¹⁴ H.W. Parke and E.W. Wormell, 35ff. A less dramatic and more economical scenario, attributed to Paul Amandry (33, 245), has the Pythia merely drawing white and black beans to respond to questions admitting of yes and no answers. The support for this view depends on the claimed historical accuracy of Xenophon's account of this same incident (see n. 15 below). But Guthrie (406, n. 2) doubts this claim can be substantiated. I am grateful to Gregory Vlastos for this reference.

¹⁵ Xenophon (*Apologia Sôkratous*, 14) confirms the report that Chaerephon solicited such a response from the oracle at Delphi but describes the content of his question, on the authority of Hermogenes, as whether anyone was more free, more just, or more temperate (*sôphronesteron*). Burnet suggests that Socrates must have had a reputation for *sophia* by the time he was thirty and implies that this motivated Chaerephon to make his inquiry (1970, 90-91). Socrates, in fact, is made by Plato to remark on Chaerephon's well known impetuosity (*AP* 21a5), and at *Charmides* 153b2, Plato has him observe, "and Charephon, as if he were a madman" (*Chairephôn de, hate kai manikos ôn*). See Burnet (1970, 90) and McPherran (2002, n. 1).

¹⁶ Why does Chaerephon ask just this question? Wouldn't the implication have been significantly different if he had asked just, "Is Socrates wise?" Would it have been inconsistent for the oracle to respond negatively to the question, "Should Socrates be banished?" and affirmatively to Chaerephon that "No one is wiser than Socrates"? And what is the effect, if any, of the prophet's putting the question to the Pythia rather than the suppliant himself? My point is that the god's oracle is always determined by the

Socrates' principle concern, however, is more likely that if the god's meaning is not enigmatic, he will be forced to reconsider his own evaluation of his claim to wisdom.

For I am aware (*sunoida*) of being wise in nothing great or small. (*AP* 21b4-5)

Contrary to what Chaerephon may have believed, nothing about his life up to this point had led Socrates to think that he had any special capacity regarding wisdom.¹⁷ Yet if what the god says is true as it appears to be from what is communicated to Chaerephon, then Socrates will be forced to give up either the belief that he knows nothing or the belief that the god knows what he is talking about.¹⁸ As it stands, he has no reason yet to give up the former and good reason to question the latter, reasons he would adduce from precisely those beliefs which have led him to this point to believe he knows "nothing great or small." So he sets out to examine and test this saying of the god, but clearly Socrates cannot examine or test the god himself. He can call into question only beliefs about what the god means when he says no one is wiser than Socrates. There would appear, then, to be at least one reason why Socrates cannot refute Apollo.

Moreover, some would argue that there is at least one more important impediment to construing Socrates' examination of the oracle as a testing or refutation. Just prior to describing

question asked and that every question necessarily asks for a certain kind of answer, even excludes some answers in preference of others. Compare Taylor's remarks (77-8).

¹⁷ Burnet (1970, 91) points to the respect of Parmenides and Protagoras exhibited in the dialogues named for them as evidence that Socrates had reasons to claim extraordinary wisdom (*PA* 127c5, *PR* 361e2). In *Charmides*, he has just returned from the battle at Potidaea after being away long enough to have to ask about the young men at Athens, who among them stood out in beauty and wisdom. If we accept the speculation (Burnet 1970, 120) that Socrates participated in the Delian campaign (BCE 424) but not the battle at Amphipolis (BCE 422), and it seems likely that Socrates would have been able to act on Chaerephon's testimony only after his return to "civilian" life, he would have begun his famous interrogations in roughly his 46th year. This dating corroborates with the first appearances of Socrates *in dramatae personae* in Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Ameipsias' *Konnos* both produced in BCE 423. McPherran (2002, n.1), with "most scholars," "acknowledging the paucity of good evidence," prefers a date closer to BCE 430, citing the same text (*AP* 28d10-29a1) that is the basis for Burnet's speculations.

¹⁸ According to Burnet (1970, 92), the Athenians were short on respect for Pythian Apollo because of its favor for their worst enemies (the Persians, the Spartans, and later Philip). This is the reason Burnet says no one would object to Socrates' attempt to prove the oracle was lying. This of course supposes that the oracle did on occasion tell the truth, and the only grounds for such a claim could be that the Pythia was truly the mouthpiece for Apollo. Socrates himself, as we are about to see, is loath to believe that the god could be lying. To explain those cases where the oracle gave suspect advice it seems safe to speculate that on those occasions this was not the god speaking at all but prophets "on the take."

how he will undertake to refute the god (*AP* 2b7-c2), Socrates expresses his doubt that what the oracle says can be false.

For certainly [the god] is not lying. It is not right (*themis*) for him [to do so]. (*AP* 21b6-7)

An elenchus cannot begin, the argument goes, by presuming that the belief to be tested is true. However ironically Socrates may lead his interlocutors into believing he takes their propositions to be true until proven inconsistent, the only reason Socrates attempts to refute those propositions is because they do not square with beliefs he holds himself.¹⁹ The truth of the interlocutor's beliefs is suspect from the start precisely because it is inconsistent with beliefs Socrates has elenctic reasons for claiming as his own. In this case, however, even if it is not expected that the god would lie (a belief Socrates may hold uniquely among his peers), it does not follow that what he and others believe to be the meaning of the god's oracle cannot be questioned or tested. My argument is that we can hold, at the same time, that Socrates performs an elenchus on the pronouncement of Apollo and successfully refutes beliefs about the apparent meaning of that pronouncement without implying it is false or that the god is a liar.

There is, in addition, yet another difficulty in reading Socrates' examination of Apollo as an elenchus. No description of the events in question would seem to support the contention that Socrates employs his "standard" method of argumentation against Apollo.²⁰ Even presuming the god has said *a fortiori* what he believes in the first place, thus abiding by the "say-what-you-believe" constraint of the "standard elenchus," it is not at all clear what Socrates believes the god himself believes. And even if Socrates could get clear about that, he is formally and materially denied the possibility of securing agreement from the god on any further beliefs which could serve as premises in an argument entailing beliefs contradicting the god's original pronouncement. Finally, as the standard model requires, it is not possible that the god himself can be shown that what he says entails such a contradiction.

Yet Plato gives every indication in the text that Socrates is about to perform just what it seems he cannot do. Clearly, Socrates is made to say he intends to refute the oracle (*AP* 21c1),

¹⁹ See "Certainty and Consistency" (267-8 and *passim*).

²⁰ See Vlastos (1983a, 38-39) for the standard account of the elenchus. See Carpenter and Polansky, Benson (2000 and 2002), Brickhouse and Smith (2002) for reservations about there being such a standard.

using the technical term that identifies his particular method (*elenchein*)²¹ and serving notice on the pronouncement reported by the god's representatives (*to manteion*). He also makes clear that it is the oracular response itself, personified as *tô chrêsmô* (AP 21c1-2),²² whom he will show (*apophanôn*, AP 21c1) to be mistaken. And, most importantly, the belief in question is clearly relevant to the ethical conduct of life as Socrates conceives it. If the god can be believed to be telling the truth, on the face of it, that no one is wiser than Socrates, Socrates would have to question his belief in his own ignorance, shaking the ground on which the consistency of all his beliefs and his way of life are based. He would be forced to re-evaluate his contribution to the well-being of the polis, perhaps taking a more active part in political deliberations, teaching those who ask for the benefit of his wisdom, and refraining from practices which threaten to remove him from public life. At any rate, he would be forced to change his life.

All of this squares with the standard applications of the elenctic procedures.²³ It is also consistent with the way Socrates often remarks that in the course of the elenchus he himself is under examination as much as the interlocutor.²⁴ But the matter is obviously somewhat more complex in this case. For if, against the reservations of those who would insist on an elenctic standard, the form of the argument here can be described fairly as an elenchus, the content of this non-standard argument appears to include elenchi of a more standard sort. Although the examinations of the politicians, poets and artisans are not detailed in the dialogue, the results of these interrogations are described as including the refutation (*exelenchein*) of the wisdom of his interlocutors (AP 23a3-5) (thus a part of the evaluation of his own relative wisdom); and Socrates describes his present activities, including those for which he has been put on trial, as a continuation of those first elenchi (AP 23b4-6). Thus, whatever premises are asserted as the basis

²¹ As Vlastos notes (1983a, 28 and n. 6) the uses of this verb and its cognate noun to describe Socrates' method proliferate the early dialogues.

²² See Burnet (1970) 92.

²³ See PR 353b5-6, EU 9c7-8, 15c1-2, REP 335e5, 336a9 for forms of *phanein* in the elenchus and everywhere for the direction of the elenchus against the one who believes he knows. Also see Vlastos (1983b).

²⁴ See CR 46d, CH 166e, PR 333c, GOR 453c.

for an elenctic examination of the proposed belief about Apollo's pronouncement on Socrates' wisdom are produced in these other elenctic examinations.²⁵

This structure of elenctic examination – elenchi tucked inside of a larger, overarching elenchus – which we are saying characterize Socrates' refutation of Apollo in the *Apology*, echoes the general structure of Plato's Socratic dialogues whose elenctic accounts of the definition of piety, courage, friendship, moderation and the like are derived from several elenctic arguments, and it is consistent with our point, here, that the general course of Socrates' life consists in a continual examination of his own life through an examination of others *kata ton theon*, “as befits the god.”

Were the beliefs about Socrates' wisdom recommended by another ordinary citizen, Chaerephon, for example, Socrates would examine him directly. In the case where we have an elenchus performed on the oracle of Apollo, however, where the god cannot be the interlocutor in this examination, who can answer for this belief and for other beliefs which may or may not entail the refutation of the god's response? The only candidate for this position in the elenchus under consideration here is Socrates himself. He is, if not the only one, the only one who we are told actively questions the apparent meaning of the oracle. Socrates himself says that the truth of the oracular pronouncement is inconsistent with the belief that he does not know anything significant, a belief held, so far as we know, by him alone. And what we learn from the *Apology* is that it is just Socrates himself who agrees to those beliefs which ultimately entail the contradictory of the god's apparent pronouncement.

The only sense to be made of this conflicting evidence is something like the following. Socrates believes he is wise in nothing great or small. Chaerephon reports that Apollo says, “No one is wiser than Socrates.” Socrates, with everybody else, believes the meaning of the god's words to be, unwarranted as the implication is, that Socrates is wiser than anyone, that is to say, Socrates is the wisest.²⁶

²⁵ In “Certainty and Consistency,” I argue that elenchi can yield beliefs though not necessarily propositions about moral claims. That the results of other elenchi are used as premises in further elenchi is consistent with the view that premises in an elenchus do not function as propositions leading to deductive (or inductive) conclusions but rather facilitate demonstrations of the inconsistency of interlocutors' beliefs.

²⁶ It is strange that Socrates takes this to be logically entailed by what he reports the Pythia said to Chaerephon (*AP* 21a6-7, *mêdena sophôteron einai*). Clearly, if “no one is wiser” than Socrates, but everyone is exactly as ignorant as Socrates is, then Socrates would not be wisest at all. But Socrates

I went to one of those reputed to be wise thinking that here if anywhere I would refute the god's response and declare to the oracle, "This man is wiser than me, but you said I [was wiser]." (AP 21b9-c2)

This meaning of Apollo's pronouncement – Socrates is wiser than anyone – is inconsistent with Socrates' long-held belief that he knows nothing. Clearly, he cannot both believe that he is wiser than anyone and that he knows nothing great or small, and he needs good reasons for giving up either one, in the first case because his belief in his own ignorance is, presumably, consistent with a number of other beliefs that have been confirmed by a lifetime of elenctic examinations and that he has no reason to doubt at this time, in the other case because he believes it is not right for the god to lie.

Since it is the only method (if it is a method) he knows, an elenchus is called for to test this new belief, but it will clearly be a distinct form of this test. For the test of what Socrates believes the god's meaning to be necessarily entails an examination of Socrates' belief that he knows nothing of any importance, and that belief will be vindicated in this elenchus and his belief in the apparent meaning of the oracle refuted just in case any one of Socrates' interlocutors survives the examination of his reputed wisdom about the right conduct of life. Having found no one among the politicians he examines with any outstanding knowledge in this regard, Socrates says he is ready to accept that the oracle cannot be refuted.²⁷

I want you to consider my adventure as labors someone labors over only for the oracle to prove to me quite irrefutable (*kai analenkτος*). (AP 22a6-8)

He does not immediately say what follows from this apparently failed refutation.

What leads Socrates to this conclusion is the failure of the politicians to live up to their reputation for wisdom. Socrates has also observed that in one respect at least he has proved wiser than any one of these interlocutors. For, Socrates says, after he had decided for himself that these

unhesitatingly excludes this middle ground. It may be that under the influence of the reputation for being a "wise man" which motivated Chaerephon to make his pilgrimage in the first place, and within the atmosphere of sophistical agnostics that characterize (at least Plato's accounts of) his dialogues with other wise men, Socrates takes the comparative to denote the superlative. When we answer the question, "Is there a composer who captures the musical nuance of incidental sounds better than John Cage?" by saying, "No one," we do not mean that there may be composers who do this just as well, but rather that Cage is the best.

²⁷ That Socrates suggests here that the oracle is "irrefutable" (*analenktos*) suggests strongly that he believes he is, or at least has been, conducting an elenchus. Why else would he find his efforts futile to this point?

men were not as wise as they supposed themselves to be,²⁸ he went on to try to show these same interlocutors that they did not know what they thought they did. It was in this part of the examination that he incurred the resentment of his interlocutor and of those who witnessed their exchange. Socrates, though, finds his way through those interrogations to another, different conclusion, one that he could not have anticipated based on his claim to know nothing significant.

And I thought to myself as I walked away that I am wiser than this man. For while neither of us knows anything fine or good, he although he does not know thinks he knows something, but I since I do not know I do not think [I do]. (AP 22d2-6)

So Socrates has failed to find among the politicians that interlocutor whose response to elenctic examination would vindicate his claim to ignorance. He recommends to the jury, therefore, that they take his further attempts to refute the oracle through interrogations of the poets and artisans as exercises in futility (AP 22a6-8). Socrates cannot refute what he believes Apollo is saying so long as he takes the god to mean that Socrates knows more about what is fine and good (*kala k'agatha*) or most important (*ta megista*) than anyone else. Socrates, however, cannot consistently believe that this is what the god means and that he knows nothing of any significance. Socrates' examinations of the politicians, poets, and artisans give him no reasons yet for believing that he knows anything of any importance. All he has concluded is that he is outstanding among his peers for not thinking he knows when he does not know. How then can he reconcile his belief that he knows nothing with the god's saying that no one is wiser than he?

Well, he can just in case he questions his belief about what Apollo's oracle means. The oracle does not mean what Socrates and everyone else believed it meant at first, that no one is wiser than Socrates. In truth, it is the god who is wise.

And it appears he says "Socrates" only to use my name and make an example (*paradeigma*) of me, as if to say that, "This man among you, people, is wisest who like Socrates grasps (*egnôken*) that he is truly worth nothing with respect to wisdom." (AP 23a7-b4)

²⁸ Socrates says only "it seems to me" (*edoxe moi*) (AP 21c5) that these men were not as wise as many other and that man himself thought him to be. These beliefs of his in the ignorance of his interlocutors, gained elenctically, are what turn up as premises in the overall elenchus directed against the literal meaning of god's oracle. These beliefs are not secured as truths but are nonetheless beliefs Socrates comes away from his examinations with. Vlastos (1985, 7) has suggested that what is crucial about the premises in any elenchus is that Socrates believes them.

On this interpretation, “Socrates” merely stands, in the oracular formulation, for the one who counts as wisest among his peers because he recognizes how badly what he “knows” compares with the knowledge of the god. And Socrates himself is “wise” not because he knows anything more or more significant than anyone else but because he recognizes just how little what he “knows” is worth and that he does not know.

This rendering of the pronouncement by Apollo can be believed by Socrates just because the saying is consistent with the belief in his own ignorance that Socrates still has no good reason for rejecting, and, perhaps, now we can now see why. If Socrates, all along, has held up as his standard of knowledge the exacting certitude of Apollo’s divine wisdom, no victory in argument over his human interlocutors has won him the privilege of claiming to know anything or to be wise at all.²⁹ Still, Socrates has to find a way to square his convictions about his ignorance with his belief in the verity of the god’s proclamation. By overturning the apparent meaning of the oracular response, that Socrates is truly wise, Apollo is refuted and vindicated at once, and in the process of examining this divine sign, Socrates’ conviction in his own ignorance is strengthened by surviving another elenctic test.

Ironically, of course, it is the *apparent* meaning of the god’s pronouncement that convicts Socrates at his trial. Socrates alone is unable to believe, finally, that the god could mean to say that no one is wiser than he. It is through the very examinations he conducts to refute that apparent reading of the Delphic oracle, Socrates explains, that he came to gain, along with a wretched reputation, the moniker “*sophos*” that we might translate as “wise guy.”

From these investigations, men of Athens, much hostility of a most painful and oppressive sort has accrued against me and so from them many malicious thoughts including this name I am called, “*sophos*.” (AP 22e6-23a5)

Even after his death, Socrates predicts, others will say he is wise even though he says he is not.

For they will say I am wise, even if I am not, these people who want to criticize you. (AP 38c3-4)

²⁹ See Vlastos (1985, 11-20) on the distinction between elenctically justifiable knowledge and certain knowledge. Vlastos argues that the Socrates of the early dialogues traffics in the former exclusively.

And so, to all appearances, Socrates fails to truly refute Apollo. In a very important and fatal sense, he fails to overturn the apparent meaning of the god's pronouncement in the minds of his contemporaries in favor of an alternative rendering of that same message that squares with his long held beliefs about his ignorance. As a result of this "failed" elenchus, he is convicted and sentenced to die.

In the end, the Athenians seem rather the more persuaded that Socrates' claims to ignorance are mere dissembling and that Socrates ought to be held accountable for what they think he knows. This, of course, allows his detractors to connect him more directly to formal charges of pedagogic malpractice in the case of the young men and of such "meddling"³⁰ in those concerns of the natural scientists thought to endanger civic piety. It is at best, then, only some small consolation that there is a philosophical sense in which Socrates successfully "refutes" the god. By an alternative, examined interpretation of Apollo's oracle, Socrates demonstrates his piety for the gods at the same time as he saves from elenctic refutation his belief in the relative worthlessness of what he knows. The overall consistency of his beliefs as well as his ethical character are, on these terms, both vindicated.

It is a virtue of the elenchus performed on the meaning of Apollo's response to Chaerephon that it highlights how Socrates' own beliefs are implicated and tested whenever beliefs are tested elenctically. It is often taken for granted how Socrates' beliefs about what an interlocutor himself believes figure into the elenchus and are always subject to revision. When the interlocutor can answer for himself, this contingency is addressed by the "say-what-you-believe" constraint which functions to settle the question about what Socrates can believe about the interlocutor's statements before the examination begins. When the belief in question concerns a divine sign, however, Socrates shows that he is ready to forward and test his own beliefs about what this sign signifies in the course of the examination itself. We may even be tempted to say Socrates takes what is generally believed to be the apparent meaning of Apollo's pronouncement as a basis or excuse for his examinations of the politicians, poets, and artisans, and that he alters his method as well as his reading only when forced by results of these

³⁰ A rendering of *phrontistês* (AP 18b7) along the lines of "giving greater attention than is warranted". On the Attic ear for *phrontizein* (more widely respected as "thinking" in Ionia) see the gloss by Burnet (76).

examinations that fail to square with the supposition that the god means to say that Socrates is truly wise.

Additionally, this elenctic examination of Apollo underscores just how Socrates' interest in testing a belief is aroused by its failure to fit with beliefs he already holds. Because of the premium Socrates places on the consistency of his beliefs, and because he accepts as believable only what can be justified by elenctic testing,³¹ he cannot permit himself the luxury of a neutral stance on the beliefs of others. He must test every and only those beliefs which are inconsistent with the set of beliefs he currently ascribes to, because to accept those beliefs as credible for another is tantamount to acknowledging their claim against the identity formed by the imputed consistency of his own beliefs. If a fellow citizen, with a shared stock of beliefs, takes something to be true that Socrates believes is false, the elenchus will expose the inconsistency of the beliefs of one or the other of them. Spared elenctic testing, each is in danger of living in conflict with the other as well as with himself. Who he is and his ethical bearing in the world are potentially inconsistent. Thus, if Socrates himself, as well as his interlocutor, is said to undergo examination in every elenctic test, it is never Socrates nor the interlocutor himself who stand to be refuted by these examination, but the ethical character they have become on the basis of the more or less consistent beliefs they hold. If the interlocutor Socrates refutes in every other early dialogue would amend his beliefs, he would amend his life. What we learn from the *Apology* is that when the beliefs in question concern a proclamation by a god, the refutation of those beliefs can only consist in clarifying how those beliefs fit an exemplary form of life, one, for example, in which lying is not *themis* for a god or a man.

Further, the examination of the divine sign, Apollo's oracle, in the *Apology* suggests that the Socratic elenchus can not be limited to one test with any particular interlocutor. We see this in the way Socrates' refutation of Apollo encompasses testing of all those who happen to have a reputation for wisdom. What there is to conclude about Apollo's oracle is an inference drawn from the examination of a great plurality of interlocutors and beliefs held up against the proposed consistency of a particular set of beliefs encapsulated in the well-known recommendation:

³¹ See Vlastos (1983a, 1985).

... this really is the greatest good for human being, each day to hold discussions concerning virtue and the other subjects about which you have heard me discoursing and examining myself and others, ... the unexamined life is not worth living ... (AP 38a2-6)

The elenchus is a way of life for Socrates. All his beliefs hinge on it, and he can no more give up testing his beliefs and those of his interlocutors than he can give up the principal belief that he knows nothing of any importance. If the only knowledge he has is a function of the elenctic examination of beliefs that are inconsistent with those held by him which have survived elenctic testing, then no belief can stand independently of further testing, not even if it originates with the gods.

In conclusion, then, there are no good reasons for privileging divinations in Socrates' case except to say that Socrates believes there is some truth in them. What that truth is, however, will always be subject to testing and interpretation. And since those interpretations can only issue from human beings and not the gods, beliefs in what these divinations mean, whenever they refer to claims about the ethical conduct of life, can always be the subject of an elenctic examination. Beliefs in what divine signs mean would seem to be as subject to examination as Socrates says, elsewhere, that beliefs about the meaning of poetry are.³² While it is likely that both have many fine and true things to say, their meanings cannot be known with certainty immediately but must be subject to an examination, and the only examination Socrates considers adequate to the task is the elenchus.³³

On this reading of Socrates' mission, his interests are in what he can know within the limits defined by the larger parameters adduced by him from the divine proclamation of his "wisdom." What Socrates gains through his examinations is a refined and reinforced consistency of the beliefs he holds which appears to warrant Socrates nothing more or less than what he needs to make him happy. Whether this same psychic condition would make anyone else happy would seem to depend on whether anyone could care for their soul in a way that would make an

³² Whatever poets may say literally, their meaning is never entirely clear even to the poets themselves. Burnet cites the reference to the *Ion* (533e5) and *Meno* (99c2) for the possession that inspires the poets to say "many fine things" and the suggestion (*MENO* 99c3-4) that *hê manteion* are likewise so possessed when they say "fine things" and even "truths."

³³ Socrates does in fact subject what the poets say to elenctic examination at *REP* 331d-333c, for example, where Simonides' statement that "justice is giving to each his due" is said to be "riddling," just what he had said about the definition Charmides remembers, Critias attributes to Hesiod, and Socrates refutes, that *sophrôsunê* is "doing your own business" (*CH* 162a10-b1).

examined life matter to them. This is just the care Socrates gives his own soul, and his “refutation” of Apollo is consistent with that effort.

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